

GUNNAR OSTERGAARD

with Pam Stone



A
Journey
Made Possible
by a Love for
the Horse



Life AS A
DRESSAGE TRAINER



IN THREE
COUNTRIES

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CHAPTER 2



EVER HUMBLE

IN 1960, AT THE AGE OF THIRTEEN, I wrote in my diary, “Is there anything more beautiful than horses? Oh, how I love my horse Johnny.”

Yet I was not born into a “horsey” family, nor did I come out of the womb half-halting between contractions and begging for a pony as soon as I could speak. My childhood was mostly a happy one, with parents who were intent on giving me the well-rounded foundation that was expected for any child of that era. This included dancing lessons (excruciating), piano lessons (less so), and scouting. However, when my interest in horses began to blossom, they attempted to distract me with something much smaller and far less expensive: budgies and homing pigeons. My father even built me a beautiful bird house for the pigeons, and for a while, this pursuit was interesting, as I would cycle miles away, a pigeon accompanying me in a small canvas bag, then release the bird and see how long it took to return home.

However, this could only placate me briefly, as I longed to be at the local riding academy where my friends were hanging out—mostly, in the beginning, to meet girls, but then to learn to ride. It was difficult not to feel left out and somewhat resentful, knowing everyone else was riding while I was tripping over my feet waltzing with a scowling young girl, and soon I rebelled, skipping my dancing lessons—still wearing the required dancing attire of white shirt and patent leather shoes—and cycling to the stable. I would return home to the ire of my mother, shoes scuffed and dusty, with the unmistakable odor of horses clinging to my hair and clothes.

However, if I were to pinpoint the exact moment I encountered my first horse, it would actually have been with my father, Eduard Østergaard. Born into a farming family with long and proud traditions, he grew up alongside the workhorses that would be driven to and from the fields, gathering the day's harvest.

I must have been six or seven when I was hoisted onto the back of one of the horses on my grandparents' farm. Broad-backed and eager to return to its stall after a day's work, the horse broke into a trot; I remember my father running alongside the animal, as if teaching a child to ride a bicycle for the first time without training wheels, and holding onto the horse as tightly as he was holding onto me. My head jounced up and down as my small body absorbed every shock of the jack-hammer, clattering trot. It was an exceedingly uncomfortable experience, and could not have been said to have ignited any sort of "horse fever" within me! I would, however, be exposed throughout those years to the sort of work ethic that would carry me through my entire riding career.

My father was the youngest of five children. In those days, it was traditional for the eldest to inherit the family farm. The next in line inherited money to buy his own farm. The next two in line—both girls—and my father inherited a mere 8 acres of forest to share. Looking back on the distribution, it was certainly not fair. Especially not for the younger ones. Yet feelings of inequality can sometimes trigger a competitive streak, and I believe this was true of Eduard Østergaard.

My father worked on various farms for three years and had thus received his agricultural training, but without a farm he had little use for his experience. He had to find something else to do, and he made the bold decision to move about nine miles away to the town of Haderslev, where he landed a job as a driver in a trucking company.

He found himself right at home, despite his rural background. When the elderly couple who owned the haulage company decided to retire, my father saw his opportunity and stepped in. He managed to buy the company and it proved to be a wise investment. In fact, he became more successful than either of his older brothers who had, respectively, inherited the family farm and inherited the money to

buy a farm. I remember my father lending them money to help them through hard times more than once.

Eduard met my mother Betty, who had also grown up on a farm with dreams of expanded horizons, and they were married in 1944. In May of 1946, I was born, as part of the great generation of post-World War II children. I entered the world in Haderslev, which is only 31 miles from the German border. Haderslev had been part of Germany from 1864 to 1920, and during World War II, Denmark was occupied by Germany; the inhabitants of Haderslev included many people who were both German and Danish. It is difficult to imagine the overall feeling of those transitions, before and after the war, for the Danes.

My parents were hard-working people. Looking back, it is amazing to me that my father not only managed his small trucking company, but also “mucked in,” driving the trucks, and loading and unloading them as well. My mother did the books, and every afternoon customers called for freight between Haderslev, Sønderborg, and Fredericia for the next day’s run. My father’s company drove between the three cities with two trucks that were always full of exciting things: machines, furniture, pianos, and even coffee and oranges, which were rare to see at the time because of the recent war.

My classmates were impressed by the big trucks and their contents. And so, I suppose, was I. When I wasn’t at school, I went to work with my dad. It was his way of getting the next generation ready to take over.

My grandparents all had small farms just outside Haderslev. And although my father, who was a trained farmer, now owned a small trucking company, his interest in farming never left him, nor has it left me. There is a crystal-clear moment from my childhood that I can recall; I was sitting in the back of the car while my parents chatted about someone they knew who had become quite successful and had acquired large amounts of land in the area. The way in which they spoke of him, with respect bordering on reverence, created within me, that very moment, a certainty that owning land would be a wonderful thing. It represented security and a sense of fulfillment. And so, years later in Vermont, I engaged part of our property in sustainable farming, and later I made a respectable income from leasing 75 acres of hunting land I had pur-

chased in Georgia, where cotton and peanuts were also grown. To this day, I find investing in real estate to be both enjoyable and exciting—particularly when it becomes a seller’s market!

But in the years of my childhood, while my father could be quite frugal with things such as household expenses—which could spark sharp disagreements with my mother about how much she was allowed to spend on grocery shopping, or clothes for a growing boy—he could also be surprisingly generous. One of the most cherished memories of my youth, which still renders me emotional to recall, is the kindness my father extended to the residents of a local children’s home.

These were children who had been either orphaned or removed by social services from abusive or neglectful households. I came to learn of them when, as a very young child, one of the first questions I can remember my mother asking my father was, “Are we going to see Didde and all the children today?”

Didde was a cousin of my father’s and the manager of this children’s home. An enormous woman whose size was only bested by her enormous heart, she ran a strict home with firm boundaries for children who had probably never experienced them, and yet there was a palpable feeling of warmth and joy when we visited, and I happily interacted with all the children—probably 20 to 25 of them.

It was an impressive red-brick building, set upon approximately 3 acres in a park-like setting, with swings and roundabouts on which the children could play. Having lost my younger sister at a very young age and feeling rather like an only child, these frequent visits were excitedly anticipated by me and were only trumped by the annual trip to the seaside.

My father—and it goes without saying that this was probably illegal—would bring his big, flex-freight truck with its tall metal framing and tarp covering to the home. Herding all of us within, he gave the strict warning that we must remain as quiet as church mice for the 45-minute drive to the borrowed beach house which awaited us. As was his custom, once we were no more than 10 minutes from the beach on the smaller roads leading to the house, he would honk his horn, giving us all permission to go wild.

Joining in giddily and feeling not only grateful to be a part of this happy group, but also hugely proud of my father's generosity, I helped rock that truck with the excited cheers of children as all of us—including me—blasted out the song, "We are the Children of Sun and Summer." Those trips meant the world to us, and it would be at that very same spot on the beach, decades later in 1978, where I would ask Birgit to marry me.

It was another one of these startling gestures of generosity from my father that brought my first horse, Johnny, the breathless topic of my diary entry, into my life. However, it must be said that while it was an enormous thing for a boy of 13 to be given a horse, I was most assuredly not to become the spoiled, privileged kid chauffeured to and fro from the riding academy. I had to cycle—everyone cycled—and was somewhat mortified to wear, day after day, the only pair of breeches I owned: a traditional dark brown pair I had received for Christmas, which ballooned out on either side of my thighs. As I was growing rapidly, it was not considered a wise investment to buy me a pair of properly fitted riding boots; instead, I could only hope no one would notice I was wearing my mother's mid-calf "scooter boots"—not unlike the American "go-go" boots of the 1960s.

All of this could have been forgiven had I not also been given a bicycle that I "would grow into," which was so ridiculously tall that my father attached wooden blocks to the pedals so I could reach them. It's a bit embarrassing to need a mounting block in order to get on a bike; why the girls at the barn didn't go wild for me, I'll never know! But anyone involved with horses learns quickly that they teach us to be ever humble, and this was certainly a way to swallow an early dose of humility. Evidently, that one dose wasn't quite enough, as nothing had prepared me for the horror I would experience when introduced to sing at the southern Jutland Coffee Table.

To explain: this "coffee table" was less a piece of furniture in front of a sofa and more an actual event, held at the farms of relatives—which certainly included a table, laden with cakes and endless cups of coffee—that was the weekend destination for my parents. Taking up much of the afternoon, it was a torturous requirement for which there was no means of escape, and I could only think about how all my

other friends were at the barn, having great fun together, while I sat sorrowfully squashed between my aunts with crumbs of *Drømmekage* (traditional Danish “dream cake”) around my mouth.

My parents, both graced with remarkable singing voices, were obliged to attend and genuinely enjoyed performing, and for me, it was non-negotiable. I was expected to join in this otherwise adults-only affair, and while it might have sounded enticing for a child to find himself before a sea of cake stands and try a sugary slice of everything, by the eighth cake, my belly was groaning and my belt too tight. Yet declining when one of the adults insisted, “Ah, go on, you must try this,” was simply unacceptable. It is amazing to me that my teeth didn’t fall out, and I didn’t wind up needing a crane to be lifted onto my horse.

And, of course, there were no real conversations in which I could join these grown-ups, as the men gathered in one room, and the women withdrew to a smaller room with their knitting and homey topics that my mother, who was a bit more cosmopolitan than her relatives, abhorred. She wasn’t the least bit interested in knitting or chatting about concerns of the hearth and home. In fact, she was the only woman in this group who went to the trouble to wear make-up and arrange her hair in the latest fashion. At one point, after doing the books for my father’s business for years, my mother was approached by a friend about working part-time in a dress shop—for my mother, this was the gateway to sophistication. She adored it. And I suspect she may have been perceived as something rather exotic, or perhaps vaguely threatening; on one occasion I remember, while wearing a low-cut blouse, she was asked by my father’s sister, with thinly veiled concern and a tight smile, “Betty, are you not freezing around your neck?”

My piano lessons had given me a bit of ability to play and, of course, I had to learn to sing. A cold chill still runs down my spine at the recollection of being pushed out, at the age of 12, in front of this small gathering to perform. With my cousin Else accompanying me on the piano, I attempted to croak out the German song “*Schlafe, mein Prinzchen, Schlafe Ein.*” My actual pronunciation was far better than my singing voice, although, truth be told, no one that evening could understand a word of my German. I wanted the floor boards to open

and swallow me. I was certain that I could hear neighboring hounds in the distance baying with each note I “sang.” Looking from face to face for some sign of encouragement, my desperate gaze only found the same confused expression that might be worn by dogs staring at a ceiling fan—utter perplexity. After what seemed an age, my mother deftly attempted to cover up my complete lack of talent by hastily explaining to all that I “certainly had a good voice,” I just “hadn’t yet learned how to hold a pitch.” Which is like saying someone is a good rider, they just haven’t yet learned how to get on a horse.

There was, however, a blessing attached to this experience. While my parents turned back to their adult conversations and my cousins were preoccupied with discussing *Popular Mechanics*, I took my chance and snuck out, unseen, to my uncle’s stable.

In the late afternoon light stood a brown colt with the prettiest little star placed right in the middle of his forehead. This young horse had a reputation for being difficult—even a little crazy. But now, there he stood in the warm stable, smelling sweetly of horse, hay, and straw. It took me an hour to get a bridle on him, and the feeling when I succeeded was incomparable. That I could gain the trust of a horse on which everyone else had given up—indescribable! Little did I know then that I would experience that feeling over and over again.

In everyone’s life, there are startling moments of clarity...epiphanies. And for me, as I turned to walk back toward the house that afternoon, there was a transformation—a deep knowledge within my very core that I had changed. That my love of horses had, as if someone had flicked on a switch, become all-encompassing.

I re-entered the house as a different person.

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CHAPTER
18



LONG VALLEY

DEBBIE JOHNSON WAS ONLY TOO AWARE that I had been burning the candle at both ends, as I returned to my full schedule of non-stop traveling for work. We came to a decision. I had to find an address in which I could actually sleep in my own bed on occasion, and Debbie would manage the barn, with the continued opportunity to teach lessons and train a few horses as well. As anyone with horses will tell you, you can't give notice at a stable without having another position lined up, so come September, she discreetly placed an ad in *The Chronicle of the Horse* that read, "Dressage trainer seeking training facility for rent in NJ, PA."

There were two responses. One included a grainy photo of a tiny indoor arena somewhere in Ohio, which was lit by a single suspended light bulb hanging from the rafters in the middle. Pass. The second response was, frankly, staggering. My eyes flew over the typewritten lines describing a newly built 32-horse facility with a huge indoor arena and lovely paddocks. Best of all, not only was a house included—which would be appropriate for Debbie—but its location, on top of Schooley's Mountain, was in Long Valley, New Jersey, which was a mere half-hour from Gladstone. I couldn't wait to see it.

The timing was perfect: there was a show in the area to which I took a group of riders to compete in a "club" class. Peggy and Liz Conroy, as well as Jerry Stone, rode together in the required 3rd-Level test, competing with several other teams of riders and earning the highest combined score; they were elated to win. It was a big class, and a big deal. On a high, Debbie and I left the show on Saturday and drove over

to meet with the owners of the Long Valley facility: Charles and Barbara Trillich. Charles had built the place for his daughters, who were into eventing and now had their own separate barn. Being a businessman, Charles saw the opportunity in building another barn—the one I hoped to lease—to earn its keep in rent.

Besides the fact that they were the nicest people I could hope to work with, the stable more than lived up to their description. The rent would be \$1,800 per month—a massive risk for me, but I believed in my own work ethic and they evidently believed in me. With a handshake to seal our agreement, it was arranged that I would be taking over the stable by mid-October.

There was very little time to celebrate, as directly after the meeting, Debbie and I had to drive to yet another clinic I had scheduled at Pat Shipley's. I'd done this each month for five months, followed by another return clinic in Montreal. Both of these clinics were always full, with a waiting list. There was certainly no shortage of work, and any nervousness about earning that monthly nut of \$1,800 at Long Valley began to dissipate, especially with the wealth of local dressage enthusiasts in the area.

There was much to do, and during all of it I was still teaching all over, but the one thing I didn't look forward to doing was informing the Conroys that I was leaving. I broke the news first to John; he was understandably disappointed, but he also realized my dilemma—it made no sense to be based in an area where there was simply not enough work. What I didn't know was that John, in his turn, would inform Liz of my impending departure on the day of her birthday. She was less than happy about it, and let me know by later approaching me to say, "Hey, thanks for the birthday present, Gunnar." That felt like the flick of a riding crop, but of course I understood her feelings. It is all water under the bridge these days, and they were gracious enough to accept my consolatory offer to return monthly to teach clinics. It was both quite sad as well as a relief to leave Plattsburgh. And by mid-October, as planned, I began working out of Long Valley.

An invitation from Sis Steinkraus to teach another clinic was a much-needed ray of sunshine, especially when she added, "Meet me in the box"—of course they had a box!—"at the National Horse Show

at Madison Square Garden, and we'll drive you home to Great Island with us."

As luck would have it, one of my clients from Long Valley had business in New York City and offered to drive me into town. Pulling over to drop me off in front of the Garden, he instructed me to take my suitcase and go downstairs, where I could stow it in a row of lockers in the basement. I found myself on my own at two in the afternoon, with hours to kill before it would be time to meet Sis and Bill at seven. Feeling out of my element, but excited, I walked for blocks and blocks, taking in the energetic buzz of the city with all its shops and cafes, while carefully avoiding 42nd Street as I'd been warned to do.

Arriving promptly back at the Garden at seven o'clock, I joined the Steinkrauses in their private box to watch the Grand Prix Jumping. It was a fantastic evening, despite one cringeworthy moment when Kathy Kusner dropped by our box to say hello to Sis and Bill. I was still learning the names of all the American equine celebrities, but evidently hadn't gotten up to the Ks, so when Sis introduced me to Kathy, my reply—"You ride, too?"—earned me a sharp dig in the ribs from Sis's elbow. Once I recovered from this faux pas, however, I had a wonderful time, and at the end of the night, Sis suggested, "Run down and get your suitcase and we'll wait for you at the main entrance." No problem—hurriedly, I retrieved my suitcase from the locker, rushing as I didn't want to make them wait. And then, inexplicably, I simply could not find my way back up! The only escalators that I could see were coming down, carrying the relentless stream of 20,000 people who had just attended the show. It was ridiculous, but there was no "up" escalator in sight, and I rushed back and forth once more in panicked search of one before impulsively jumping onto one of the "down" ones, running against this tide of people—all of whom, I'm quite sure, thought I had escaped from Bellevue. I was panting, sweating, elbowing my way up, and the whole time I couldn't stop thinking about how I was inconveniencing my generous hosts by making them wait.

Halfway up, I heard someone say, "This guy's got a long way to go..." He was right. In the end, I made Sis and Bill wait for 15 minutes—it felt like an hour—and they were polite enough not to ask why I was

breathing as if I'd just finished second at Pimlico. Silently, I got into the back of the car, and they returned me to Darien.

The late 1970s were a whirlwind for me, beginning with 1976, which was very much a year of firsts: my first top facility, my first sponsor, my first nightmare, and my first time getting shafted on a business deal—ironically, by a fellow Dane!

Each morning, driving into Long Valley, knowing this beautiful barn and indoor arena was mine, was the best feeling in the world—especially being only minutes away from Gladstone, which meant a lot to me. As always, in time, the rose-colored glasses come off to reveal an unwelcome surprise or two...the main one being that when I had agreed to take over the Long Valley stable on that warm September afternoon, it hadn't occurred to me that, come winter, regular snow plowing would be required, and I would be obliged to pay. Hundreds. This was an expensive lesson learned. However, the good far outweighed the bad.

I had come to know Marty and Holly Simensen through teaching. Marty's reputation as a top veterinarian, national Team vet, and all-around great guy was well deserved. Holly was Canadian, and after auditing one of my Wednesday clinics in Montreal, she approached me while I was still based at the Conroys' and offered to give me a horse to ride and show: Glass Owl. He was a tall, lanky chestnut, an ex-race-horse, and he followed me to Long Valley. I still feel very sentimental about Glass Owl, especially as he was to become the first horse that I would compete in my first dressage show in the States, held in New Jersey. He did me proud: entered into two 3rd-Level classes, he won them both, bringing home a hatful of blue ribbons. I enjoyed training him, and he was coming along nicely.

In an utterly tragic twist of fate, months later Glass Owl would suffer a freak accident in the middle of the night, requiring him to be immediately euthanized. Having received word from the night security guard, I had rushed over, and was devastated. Now I hesitated, heart in my throat, to dial the phone and give Holly the dreadful news at two in the morning. No trainer ever wants to have to make that sort of call, and yet the first words that this incredibly kind and understanding woman spoke after digesting what I had relayed to her were, "Don't

worry—I will get you another horse.” How anyone could put someone else’s feelings over their own at such a terrible time was, and still is, beyond me, but that was Holly, and I will always be grateful to her.

Things began to look up again as I started teaching clinics at George Morris’s Hunterdon Farm, a half-hour away. No one in the hunter world, of course, was a bigger name than George, and for it to be known that I was teaching all his upper level riders (who, by the way, impressed me with their understanding of straightness and technique) meant that, come winter, I was teaching at all the top hunter barns in the area.

On the heels of all this work, there seemed to be yet another terrific opportunity lining up for me. While at Long Valley, I had learned that there was a Danish dressage judge living in the area. Gunnar Andersen had done a clinic or two at her place, and she decided to trailer over for a few lessons with her Swedish Warmblood, who was schooling 3rd Level. I felt the horse had plenty of talent but obviously needed much more training. We agreed that if she would pay his board, I would do all the training for free, in exchange for having the opportunity to compete him the following spring. I kept my side of the bargain by riding the horse daily, and was feeling pretty enthusiastic about how he was progressing.

Looking forward to going to the upcoming shows with something really rather impressive to compete, I was left open-mouthed when one day, out of the blue, she announced that she would be taking him back home.

“But we talked about this—me training him for free all this time so that I could show him in the spring!” I said, flabbergasted.

“Well,” she agreed, “we talked about it...” and then she let the rest of the sentence die away.

She took the horse away, with heaps of correct training now in place. I couldn’t believe anyone could be so brazenly dishonest. In the end, I suppose that in every life, a little rain—or should I say a little Dane—must fall.